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ABSTRACT

Antebellum slave narratives can be valuable literary materials in four different kinds of literature courses. In a survey of American literature, slave narratives serve as records of the attitudes and activities of early Americans, as examples of travel literature, and as examples of late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century adventure stories. Slave narratives also have an obvious place in courses concentrating on biography and autobiography as literary types or genres and in consciousness raising freshman English courses for which the themes of courage, love of freedom, and perseverance would be evident. For an Afro-American literature course, slave narratives can supply literary records of the mind and soul of a people as well as offer a structural model for other black literature. (JM)

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USES OF THE ANTEBELLUM SLAVE NARRATIVES IN COLLEGIATE COURSES IN LITERATURE

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In a generation still bemused by that formalist criticism which detaches the author in order to scrutinize the literary work as a self-generated objet d'art, some teachers of literature question where, or whether, to teach biographies and autobiographies. Regardless of their artistic merits, these works reek of cultural contexts and necessitate biographical examination. No matter how carefully one focuses on Boswell's Life of Johnson as an art object -- a model for biography, James Boswell interposes himself so frequently that finally one must look at him as the author of the work. Unquestionably, the language and the style of Pepys' Diary are worthy of study, but they lose significance when compared with the spectacle of life in seventeenth-century England and with the necessity of ascertaining the bifocaled vision through which readers are permitted to view that life. For these reasons, some teachers expel biography and autobiography from the classroom in literature and force them to stand in the hallway, where a wandering history teacher may discover them and make them welcome.

In contrast, when numbers of teachers of literature, during the final years of the 1960's, began to interest themselves in works by Afro-Americans, they frequently turned first to autobiography and, with sincere but thoughtless enthusiasm, embraced not only such a skilled professional writer as James Baldwin but even such nonprofessionals as Sammy Davis, Jr., and Althea Gibson. This interest in autobiographical statement may even have contributed to the renewed popularity of some seemingly autobiographical novels, such as Native Son and Invisible Man. Obviously, the teachers who selected works in this manner were less concerned with the quality and the craft of the writing than with the content of a statement by a contemporary black person. The statement's existence as a written document may have been the excuse for discussing the work in a class in literature, but the discussion itself often was more appropriate for a class in sociology, political science, economics, ethics, or any of several other social sciences. For many teachers so motivated, autobiographical statements from the past were irrelevant because, no matter how interesting they might be, they seemed useless as predictors of what blacks might do in the streets of America in the 1970's.

Both groups of teachers of literature -- those who scorn autobiography as non-literary and those who are interested only in contemporaneous autobiographical statements by black Americans -- both groups, must be blamed for the continuing neglect of the narratives which former slaves told in the decades before and immediately after the Civil War. Although historians may be criticized for failing to use the materials sufficiently in teaching the history of this nation, it is nonetheless true that historians generally have been more alert than teachers of literature to values of the narratives. Historians have examined the materials to discover a black perspective of slavery and a picture of black people as slaves. I do not propose, however, to discuss the uses which historians may or should devise. Nor shall I discuss uses that should be considered by black writers; I have explored that topic in another essay. Instead, I wish to suggest ways in which teachers of

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literature may use antebellum narratives in four different kinds of literature courses -- the survey of American literature, the genre course, the thematic or "consciousness raising" freshman course, and the survey of Afro-American literature. Furthermore, I shall address myself especially to literature teachers who are not familiar with the antebellum narratives or who do not teach from them. In so restricting my audience, I may seem didactic or elementary to other teachers who are knowledgeable about the narratives. Please forgive me.

Not too long ago, teachers might have excused themselves for failing to teach slave narratives; few texts were available. Today, however, individual paperbacks and such collections as Gilbert Osofsky's Puttin' On Ole Massa[1] and Arna Bontemps' Great Slave Narratives[2] provide the stories of such former slaves as Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), William and Ellen Craft, J.W.C. Pennington, and Solomon Northup.[3] To illustrate and emphasize the manner in which these easily available texts can be used, I shall limit my examples in this paper to these antebellum narratives, which, I believe, have more literary interest than the slave narratives collected during the twentieth century.

The early part of a survey of American literature lends itself to the study of biography and autobiography. The letters of John Smith, journals of religious leaders, the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, and autobiographical essays by less well-known individuals: all these hold respected places in college surveys -- not necessarily as models of literary elegance but as records of the attitudes and activities of early Americans. Certainly, many slave narratives lend themselves admirably to this kind of study. The narrative of Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) extols hard work and a spirit of adventure -- characteristics which have been praised as part of the American spirit. Frederick Douglass's autobiography reveals the insights of a man who, more than any other black before Booker T. Washington, was called upon to speak for black America. In narratives of individuals less well-known than Douglass, one finds further enunciations of an American ethic. Characteristic is the narrative of James W.C. Pennington, in which the author, a devout Christian at the time of the writings, painfully attempts to justify to his readers and himself the deceit and the violence which he used to free himself from slavery.

A study of slave narratives in a survey of American literature can also focus on the narrative as an example of travel literature. Highly popular in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the travel tale purported to be a man's account of his voyage to an exotic land. In addition to recounting his adventures, the writer generally described in detail the customs and the appearances of the foreign land. In similar manner, the fugitive slaves, knowing that most of their readers had never seen a plantation, described the culture of both the slaves and the masters.

[1] Gilbert Osofsky, ed. Puttin' On Ole Massa, New York: Harper, 1969 (Narratives of Henry Bibb, W.W. Brown, and Solomon Northup).

[2] Arna Bontemps, Great Slave Narratives, New York: Macmillan, 1969 (Narratives of Gustavus Vassa, J.W.C. Pennington, and William and Ellen Craft).

[3] Titles of representative narratives and collections of narratives are listed in my bibliography, Afro-American Writers (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970) and in other bibliographies of Afro-American culture.

Perhaps the most interesting narrative in this respect is The Life of Gustavus Vassa, the African, for Vassa describes Africa -- a continent unfamiliar not only to his eighteenth-century readers but also to most of his twentieth-century readers. Comparable interest, however, can be elicited by Henry Bibbs' account of his life as a slave among Indians or Solomon Northup's description of life first on a cotton plantation and later on a sugar plantation.

Needless to say, the antebellum narratives also have value in a survey of American literature as examples of late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century adventure stories. Each narrative includes one or more episodes of a flight, a chase, or a perilous adventure. Just a few instances will suffice as illustration: Gustavus Vassa's trip to the North Pole, Henry Bibbs' numerous escapes and recaptures, the flight of William and Ellen Craft disguised as master and slave, the confrontation between Douglass and an overseer determined to make Douglass docile. All these -- told sensationally and suspensefully or in a matter-of-fact tone -- all these provide drama and and excitement far surpassing the factual or even most of the fictional materials offered in surveys of nineteenth-century American literature.

A picaresque quality of the narratives derives partially from the actual conditions of slavery. Few slaves remained with a single master throughout their lives. Most were leased, loaned, or sold temporarily or permanently to several owners; consequently, a faithful rendering of the life of any slave seems episodic. Furthermore, whether in flight or on the plantation, any slave -- even the most docile and self-abasing -- remained in such continuous jeopardy that his or her status amounted to that of a picaro who played the rogue to survive.

Slave narratives, obviously, should also have a place in those courses concentrated entirely on the study of autobiography and biography as literary types or genres. Here, perhaps, the question of authenticity may seem significant. That is, teachers of courses in autobiography wish to evaluate the authors as individual artists rather than merely as contributors to a particular literary genre. Many of the slave narrators, however, were illiterate; others who knew how to write were assisted by abolitionists, who may have modified the style and the language. Moreover, narratives supposedly written by slaves actually were fictional works created entirely by whites. All these facts should cause a teacher to exercise caution when selecting a slave narrative as an illustration of the artistic skill of a particular individual. Nevertheless, some narratives can be used with little doubt. The ones which come to mind first are those by Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, whose literary skills are attested by their literary reputations outside the genre of the slave narrative. Furthermore, unlike most slave narrators, both Douglass and Brown achieved an eminence which makes them interesting as individuals. In contrast, many other slave narrators -- the Crafts, Henry "Box" Brown, and even Bibbs and Northup -- are remembered chiefly because they endured slavery and later escaped.

William Wells Brown and Douglass, however, are not the only slaves whose manuscripts deserve a place in courses in autobiography. Of those easily available, the narratives of Bibbs, Northup, and Vassa especially are distinguished by the quality of their writing as well as the content. For fear that readers might question the authenticity of the narrative, Bibbs and his publishers added an introduction by Lucius Matlack, who attested that anyone who had heard Bibbs speak would not question Bibbs' ability to use language skillfully. In addition, Matlack asserted, he had actually observed Bibbs writing parts of the narrative. The author and the publisher also collected

testimony from former masters of Bibbs, who, anxious to provide a point-by-point refutation of Bibbs' allegations of their cruelty, unintentionally verified his narrative. There is little doubt also that Solomon Northup wrote his own story. Born free, educated by his father, Northup was thirty years old when he was kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Teachers may also use slave narratives effectively in those freshman English courses that I identify as "thematic" or "consciousness-raising" courses. Within the past two decades, increasing numbers of teachers of college freshmen have searched for socially or philosophically "revelant" documents to use as materials for reading and as springboards for oral and/or written discussion. I must confess some distrust of such courses: I fear that the teacher and the students may become so excited by the materials that they concentrate on the materials as ends in themselves rather than as a means to assist a student to improve his or her skills in communication and rhetoric. My misgivings, however, will not stop teachers from developing courses in which they use or abuse "relevant" materials; therefore, respecting the tide, I merely would encourage teachers to consider the possibility of slave narratives as a source for themes.

The most obvious themes to be culled from slave narratives are courage, love of freedom, and perseverance. Scarcely a narrative fails to provide examples of courage to inspire impressionable students (or adults, for that matter). Most of the narratives are stories of slaves who fled from the South to the North. Although it may have been fairly common, as Gilbert Osofsky suggests, for a petulant or weary slave to hide out in the fields for a night or two, even this adventure risked a whipping. The more arduous task of flight to the North presented an almost unconceivable ordeal. The major hazard was not escape from the plantation (which had no locked gates or barbed wire), but the journey beyond. Outside the plantation, the fugitive faced the patrollers armed with rifles and assisted by dogs. (Despite some twentieth-century apologies that bloodhounds merely pursue the scent of the fugitive without causing bodily harm, the fugitive slaves knew first-hand that the patrollers' dogs bit.) Beyond the patrollers, the fugitive must travel on foot without compass or map across a thousand or more miles of strange country where he or she might be stopped by a suspicious white or betrayed by a black. Traveling by night, hiding by day, the fugitive hoped that the land or some kind person would provide food or drink until he or she reached the journey's end in a place called Canada. (Despite the tales of escape to Ohio or Cairo, Illinois, or even Boston, a slave was subject to recapture unless he found his way outside the United States.) When one considers the difficulties and the dangers, it is not surprising that a Solomon Northup planned escapes for ten years without attempting any; in fact, it is amazing that any slaves fled.

Consider how loud and how long during the past decade Americans clamored for the government of the United States to effect the release of American soldiers who had been captured in Viet Nam. Few people hoped or believed that these American captives -- educated products of a sophisticated society -- would be able to free themselves and flee through the miles which separated them from friendly troops. Yet, one hundred and fifty years earlier, even more difficult escapes were planned and executed by African descendants who had no memories of freedom, who had been taught that God willed them to remain in bondage to whites, who had knowledge of the world outside the plantation, and who could not hope that their journey would end in the embrace of a powerful army -- at best, they might be welcomed or at least ignored by a few non-hostiles. Such sagas of courage and desire for freedom have few parallels

in human history. For fear that I have seemed excessively sentimental or chauvinistic in reconstructing the past, let me cite the high praise expressed by Thomas H. Higginson, an officer in the Union army:

> years of intercourse with fugitive slaves, [have shown me] that if the truth could be fairly told to-day, we white Anglo-Saxons on this continent must yield the palm of native heroism to the negro [sic]. I tell you, that if you had seen and heard the things some of us have seen and heard you would think so too. . . . Go among the thousands of refugees in Canada, hear their simple story, talk with the men and women, learn what they have gone through in their efforts to escape, seven times seven repeated, more than once, and you will learn of courage which puts to shame the puny efforts of us who call ourselves men of courage here and now. There is not a great deed in history, there is not an act of self-devotion . . . there is not one single item in the long catalogue of self consecration in the ages which I cannot match with some act as heroic and noble, done by an African . . .[1]

The ordeals I have just described are the reason also that one can find in the narratives numerous opportunities for discussions of the theme of perseverance. Few slaves were successful in a first attempt. Douglass and William Wells Brown were forced to witness the punishment of loved ones because they had attempted escape. Some were branded. Henry Bibbs and others were whipped -- fifty to two hundred lashes. Yet many of these blacks tried again and again, and then, sometimes, risked recapture when they returned South to rescue members of their family. Having escaped, Henry Bibbs four times returned South in unsuccessful efforts to free his wife and child. Once he was recaptured. The other times he barely escaped. Yet he continued to return. Pennington's flight was not a single escape, but a series of escapes from individuals who captured him.

As I have suggested before, slave narratives also offer bases for discussing the "American" ethic. Most of the fugitives had been reared in this country. They had learned values and standards not merely from their fellow blacks but also from white overseers, masters, and ministers. It should not be surprising, therefore, that their narratives abound with expressions of their religious faith (even when they disdain the religious teachings by whites), and expressions of their willingness to work hard to earn whatever they may receive. Douglass reported himself to be a hard and skillful worker. Pennington proudly identified himself as a first-class blacksmith. Admitting his ineptness as a cotton-picker, Northup boasts of his skill in the canefields. No shirker of hard work, he even confessed his willingness to endure the labors of slavery if he might have had his family with him and if the treatment had been mild. Like European immigrants, they wished to prove their Americanness by practicing the principles which this nation professed to honor. Capitalism, Christianity, individualism, honesty, industriousness -- these once-cherished "American" virtues were enunciated by the blacks who, refusing to adjudge America to be synonymous with slavery,

[1]Quoted in Gilbert Osofsky, ed., Puttin'on Ole Massa (Harper, 1969), p. 29.

fled from that oppression which they considered non-American in order to prove that they could become part of the real America.

Finally, slave narratives obviously have an important place in courses in Afro-American literature. Like surveys of American literature, surveys of Afro-American literature seek to define the culture of one particular group of people partly by examining written documents which, however uneven in literary quality, reflect the ideas of that people. Slave narratives, in this sense, constitute as integral a part of the study of black American culture as the writings of John Smith, William Bradford, Edward Taylor, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and others are a part of a study of white American culture. The narratives are the literary records of the mind and soul of a people.

In Afro-American literature, however, they also offer a model not provided by comparable documents of white American culture. The slave narratives have provided a structural model imitated -- consciously or unconsciously -- not only by later black autobiographers, but also by twentieth-century black novelists. This model can be induced from the early narratives. Almost all consist of four important structural modes: 1) a description of the conditions of oppression; 2) an account of the manner by which the slave developed a concept of freedom; 3) a report of the method of attempting to secure that freedom; and 4) a statement of the contrast between the actuality of freedom and the ideal of freedom.

This perhaps excessively simplistic analysis of the structural elements of slave narratives is not original. Nor is it intended to be all-inclusive. But, for the sake of clarity, let me explain it and suggest its value in a study of subsequent literature by Afro-Americans.

In each slave narrative is a description of the conditions which oppressed the slave. Although the common oppression for all the narrators was slavery itself, the particulars of oppression varied. In some narratives, oppression may appear as physical brutality by an overseer or owner; in others, as the anguish caused by separation from loved ones or by the inability to protect loved ones; in still others, narratives, oppression may have been merely the awareness that one was eternally subject to the whims of another human being. Whatever the condition or conditions of oppression, the fugitive slaves described them.

A second characteristic structural element of slave narratives is an account of the manner in which the slave first conceived the idea of freedom and the thought of gaining it for himself. For those born free -- such individuals as Vassa and Northup -- the desire for freedom was present from the first hour of slavery. But what of the others -- the Douglasses, the Browns, the Bibbs, the Crafts -- who were born into slavery and who were reared by masters determined to make them believe that bondage was their natural, inevitable, God-predestined condition? How do such people gain an idea of freedom, and what do they believe freedom to be? This constitutes one of the most important elements of a narrative whether the answer is Northup's assertion that all slaves intuitively knew slavery to be wrong or whether the answer came as a result of a confrontation with an overseer or an observation of the weakness of a master or the instruction by a sympathetic white or fellow black.

A third element generally present is the description of the slave's method of escaping. In many narratives this is the most interesting part. Rarely did the narrator, like Douglass, suppress the details for fear that disclosure might prevent the future escapes of others. In the story of William and Ellen Craft, all other elements pale in contrast to the suspenseful

story of their first-class journey on train and boat, with Ellen Craft posing as a young white master and William as the dutiful slave. Henry Bibbs' narrative is obviously written to gain maximum drama from the detailed reports of his confrontations, narrow escapes, and recaptures. Even when the freedom was effected by an outside agency, as in Northup's report of the manner in which legal agencies proved his free status and released him from bondage, even then every iota of drama and suspense is squeezed from the moment and the method of gaining freedom.

The final structural element is less obvious. After the slave had escaped and had lived in the North, he told his story. Frequently, during the interim, the fugitive had discovered that, despite his freedom from bondage, he was experiencing a life far less pleasurable than he had imagined -- a life in which he continuously feared that hostile whites or treacherous blacks would return him to slavery. This final element, often implied rather than explicitly stated, is the fugitive's comparison of his actual condition with his preconceived ideal of freedom.

Comprehension of these elements of the slave narrative would have limited value if the elements were found only in the narratives themselves. They are not so limited, however. They also offer a method for examining autobiographies and novels by blacks in succeeding generations.

A reason for the structural resemblances between the nineteenth-century narratives and twentieth-century autobiographies and novels may be explained by Arna Bontemps' observation of the reason for autobiographies by blacks. Most white autobiographers or subjects of biography, Bontemps suggested, are nationally or internationally renowned individuals. Although readers may have a little interest in the ways in which these individuals rose to their positions of eminence, readers have far greater interest in the description of the lives while at the height -- the famous people they know, what they do, what they think, how they live. In contrast, Bontemps explained, most black autobiographers or subjects of biography have less prominence. Consequently, readers are not so interested in descriptions of the positions they hold as in accounts of the ways in which they reached whatever stature they have attained.

Although greater numbers of individual American blacks are nationally and internationally prominent today than ever before, Bontemps' observation remains basically true. When one reads the autobiography or biography of a black, what matters generally is not the destination the black has reached, but the distance and the manner of the journey. Therefore, what was true about readers' expectations of slave narratives continues to be true about expectations of current autobiographies or realistic/naturalistic novels of self-discovery. Just as the slave narrators realized or were guided to satisfy this expectation, so subsequent autobiographers and novelists have continued to appease it. Consequently, an understanding of the basic structural elements of the antebellum narratives serves as a useful approach to an analysis of a twentieth-century autobiography, such as The Autobiography of Malcolm X or Claude Brown's Manchild in the Promised Land, or a twentieth-century novel, such as Wright's Native Son.

Of course, the particular details have changed. The oppression to be described is not legalized slavery in the South, but poverty in a Northern ghetto or violence by night riders or discrimination by an educational system. The ideal of freedom is not life in a land where one is not a slave; the new ideal is financial security or a job or social status or self-respect or black-consciousness. The method of escape is not physical flight but education or violence or instruction. The uncertainty of "freedom" is no longer the fear of a return to slavery but the fear that one cannot live freely as a black person and a citizen in a hostile society. The particulars are different, but the structural pattern remains the same.

In a brief paper, of course, I can merely suggest uses of slave narratives rather than to explore all possibilities and illustrate them in detail. Nevertheless, even this scratching of the surface should suggest ways in which slave narratives might be introduced as valuable literary materials in surveys of American literature, in genre courses, in freshman literature courses, and in surveys of Afro-American literature. Now that many narratives are available in inexpensive reprints, more teachers of literature should examine them and should be able to discover classroom uses in addition to those I have described.